

Proclamation 8623 of January 14, 2011

Religious Freedom Day, 2011

By the President of the United States of America
A Proclamation

Our Nation was founded on a shared commitment to the values of justice, freedom, and equality. On Religious Freedom Day, we commemorate Virginia's 1786 Statute for Religious Freedom, in which Thomas Jefferson wrote that "all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion." The fundamental principle of religious freedom—guarded by our Founders and enshrined in our Constitution's First Amendment—continues to protect rich faiths flourishing within our borders.

The writ of the Founding Fathers has upheld the ability of Americans to worship and practice religion as they choose, including the right to believe in no religion at all. However, these liberties are not self-sustaining, and require a stalwart commitment by each generation to preserve and apply them. Throughout our Nation's history, our founding ideal of religious freedom has served as an example to the world. Though our Nation has sometimes fallen short of the weighty task of ensuring freedom of religious expression and practice, we have remained a Nation in which people of different faiths coexist with mutual respect and equality under the law. America's unshakeable commitment to religious freedom binds us together as a people, and the strength of our values underpins a country that is tolerant, just, and strong.

My Administration continues to defend the cause of religious freedom in the United States and around the world. At home, we vigorously protect the civil rights of Americans, regardless of their religious beliefs. Across the globe, we also seek to uphold this human right and to foster tolerance and peace with those whose beliefs differ from our own. We bear witness to those who are persecuted or attacked because of their faith. We condemn the attacks made in recent months against Christians in Iraq and Egypt, along with attacks against people of all backgrounds and beliefs. The United States stands with those who advocate for free religious expression and works to protect the rights of all people to follow their conscience, free from persecution and discrimination.

On Religious Freedom Day, let us reflect on the principle of religious freedom that has guided our Nation forward, and recommit to upholding this universal human right both at home and around the world.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 16, 2011, as Religious Freedom Day. I call on all Americans to commemorate this day with events and activities that teach us about this critical foundation of our Nation's liberty, and to show us how we can protect it for future generations here and around the world.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this fourteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand eleven, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-fifth.

BARACK OBAMA

Proclamation 8624 of January 14, 2011

Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday, 2011

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Half a century ago, America was moved by a young preacher who called a generation to action and forever changed the course of history. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. devoted his life to the struggle for justice and equality, sowing seeds of hope for a day when all people might claim “the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” On Martin Luther King, Jr., Federal Holiday, we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the holiday recognizing one of America’s greatest visionary leaders, and we celebrate the life and legacy of Dr. King.

Dr. King guided us toward a mountaintop on which all Americans—regardless of skin color—could live together in mutual respect and brotherhood. His bold leadership and prophetic eloquence united people of all backgrounds in a noble quest for freedom and basic civil rights. Inspired by Dr. King’s legacy, brave souls have marched fearlessly, organized relentlessly, and devoted their lives to the unending task of perfecting our Union. Their courage and dedication have carried us even closer to the promised land Dr. King envisioned, but we must recognize their achievements as milestones on the long path to true equal opportunity and equal rights.

We must face the challenges of today with the same strength, persistence, and determination exhibited by Dr. King, guided by the enduring values of hope and justice embodied by other civil rights leaders. As a country, we must expand access to opportunity and end structural inequalities for all people in employment and economic mobility. It is our collective responsibility as a great Nation to ensure a strong foundation that supports economic security for all and extends the founding promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to every American.

Dr. King devoted his life to serving others, reminding us that “human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle—the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.” Commemorating Dr. King’s life is not only a tribute to his contributions to our Nation and the world, but also a reminder that every day, each of us can play a part in continuing this critical work.

For this reason, we honor Dr. King’s legacy with a national day of service. I encourage all Americans to visit www.MLKDay.gov to learn more about service opportunities across our country. By dedicating this day to service, we move our Nation closer to Dr. King’s vision of all Americans living and working together as one beloved community.